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PROGRAM All Things Considered

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SUBJECT Anti-Terrorist Group

NOAH ADAMS: In Washington, the Central Intelligence Agency today issued a statement to deny reports of an agency-trained anti-terrorist group in Lebanon. Sunday's edition of the Washington Post claimed that an anti-terrorist group was trained by the CIA to strike against organizations suspected of targeting U.S. embassies and other facilities in the Middle East. But according to The Post account, these CIA-trained counter-terrorists independently hired other people to blow up the home of a radical Shiite leader believed to be behind attacks on U.S. facilities. This action, the newspaper said, was carried out without prior CIA knowledge. And on that point, the CIA today concurred.

NPR's Catherine Ferguson has more on the story.

CATHERINE FERGUSON: The car-bombing of the residence of the suspected terrorist leader Muhamma Fadlallah occurred March 8th. Eighty persons were killed, another 200 were wounded. It was apparently after this incident, carried out by persons hired by CIA trainees, that the agency cancelled the counter-terrorism program in Lebanon.

But today the CIA denied the existence of the covert training operation. The agency's statement was paraphrased by State Department spokesman Edward Djerejian.

EDWARD DJEREJIAN: The CIA never conducted any training of Lebanese security forces related to the events described in the Washington Post's story on May 12th, and that it also had no foreknowledge of the Lebanese counter-terrorist action mentioned in the article.

FERGUSON: The White House and the State Department routinely decline comment on alleged covert activities. Today was no exception when reporters raised questions about the actions of CIA trainees in Lebanon.

At the State Department, spokesman Djerejian said that the U.S. does not undertake activities inconsistent with the law. And in fact, a covert activity of this type -- that is, training foreign nationals in anti-terrorist activity -- is not against U.S. law. The only current requirement is that the CIA Director or another designated official keep the House and Senate Intelligence Committees informed of their activities in a timely manner. And on this point there is some debate.

The Vice Chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, Democrat Senator Patrick Leahy of Vermont, has reportedly voiced dissatisfaction at having to go to the agency for more information on the Lebanese anti-terrorism program after reporters asked him about it. The CIA, he said, did not volunteer the information.

And according to a congressional source on the House Intelligence panel, only the past chair and vice chair were briefed, not the full committee. But a CIA briefing of only the two ranking members of the two Intelligence Committees is in compliance with the letter of the law, if not, said one source, with the spirit.

The Chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, David Durenberger of Minnesota, has called CIA officials to testify before the panel on Wednesday.

DANIEL ZWERDLING: Since 1976, under a presidential order, the CIA has been banned from killing foreign leaders. President Gerald Ford issued the rule after a congressional hearing unearthed a history of agency assassination attempts in the '50s and '60s. Targets had included Cuba's Fidel Castro and Africa's Patrice Lumumba, among others.

News analyst Daniel Schorr covered the hearings ten years ago, and he says President Reagan has been moving away from strict enforcement of President Ford's original order.

DANIEL SCHORR: There is a gray, an ambiguous area there where you hire foreign mercenaries to do jobs for intelligence agencies, a lot of things happen with a wink and a nod and a general understanding or belief that there is an understanding. So that, clearly, this group must have believed that somebody was going to pin a medal on them if they were able to knock off this chief terrorist.

I believe, myself -- it can only be speculation -- that

because they did not kill the person they wanted to kill, but did kill 80 civilians, that what really happened was that the agency found it necessary immediately to protect its rear by disowning, disavowing, and eventually disbanding the group that did it.

ZWERDLING: But I guess that raises the next question, and that is that even if the Administration knew, or did not know, that the bombing was going to take place, what is the Administration's stand on this sort of bombing in general?

SCHORR: Well, there'd been a series of speeches by President Reagan, and especially several by Secretary Shultz, warning the United States is not going to stand by and wait for terrorism to happen, that when they get knowledge of a terroristic act to be committed, they will step in and try to preempt it. It is very difficult in the area of terrorism to deal with preemption without taking a chance that you're going to hit some innocent bystanders. And in fact, Secretary Shultz suggested that if that happened, that might be a necessary price of fighting terrorism. But, clearly, the present policy is that you go after terrorists if you can, you take your chances on hitting innocent people.

So that in this case, had it worked, I would doubt that the position would be that they did it as a runaway group. The position would be, "Yes, we did it, and we're glad."

ZWERDLING: What are political observers here in town, both inside and outside the Administration, saying about whether the CIA really is going to have to get more involved in this sort of activity, financing counter-terrorist groups? I mean, after all, it is a pretty persuasive argument, isn't it, that if we have pretty evidence that a terrorist group is about to bomb a U.S. embassy, for instance, we can't just sit by and do nothing?

SCHORR: I think that polls indicate and talking to people around the country indicate that the public in general supports the idea of preemption. I don't think you can get people to say that they want innocent people to be killed. Unfortunately, if you're going after terrorists, it's very difficult to know if you're going after the right person; or even if it is the right person, whether you don't take some civilian innocent bystanders along with him.

But since the innocent bystanders are foreigners, and the Marines, the American embassy people who were killed are ours, I would suspect that American public opinion overwhelming would support this kind of thing.

ZWERDLING: Daniel Schoor, do you think this whole incident is going to have any sort of political fallout that will

affect the CIA operations in the future?

SCHORR: Oh, I think, as usual, the CIA sort of ducks and runs for cover when something goes wrong. I don't think anybody in the CIA or the Administration thinks that policy ought to be changed, trying to take preemptive action against terrorists. But I guess it's going to be a review of where did we go wrong and why did this one work out so badly, and let's do it better next time.

ZWERDLING: Daniel Schorr, thank you very much.